

Remarks at a Veterans Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
November 11, 2009

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you, Secretary Shinseki, for the generous introduction, more importantly, the extraordinary bravery in service to our country, both on and off the battlefield. I want to thank our outstanding Vice President, Joe Biden, and his wonderful wife, Dr. Jill Biden, for being here today. We want to thank the Bidens for their son, Beau's, service as well; we're glad he just got back from Iraq.

We want to say a special word of thanks to Brigadier General Karl Horst, who's the commander of the Military District of Washington, for being here, and for your lifetime of distinguished service to our Nation. To Gene Crayton, president of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, thank you for being here, and to all the veterans service organizations for the extraordinary work, day in, day out on behalf of our Nation's heroes.

To the members of our Armed Forces and the veterans who are here today, I am deeply honored and humbled to spend Veterans Day with you in this sacred place where generations of heroes have come to rest and generations of Americans have come to show their gratitude.

There are many honors and responsibilities that come with this job, but none is more profound than serving as Commander in Chief. Yesterday I visited the troops at Fort Hood. We gathered in remembrance of those we recently lost. We paid tribute to the lives they led. There was something that I saw in them, something that I see in the eyes of every soldier and sailor, airman, marine, and coast guardsman that I have had the privilege to meet in this country and around the world, and that thing is determination.

In this time of war, we gather here mindful that the generation serving today already deserves a place alongside previous generations for the courage they have shown and the sacrifices that they have made. In an era where so many acted only in pursuit of narrow self-interest, they've chosen the opposite. They chose to serve the cause that is greater than self, many even after they knew they'd be sent into harm's way. And for the better part of a decade, they have endured tour after tour in distant and difficult places, they have protected us from danger, and they have given others the opportunity for a better life.

So to all of them—to our veterans, to the fallen, and to their families—there is no tribute, no commemoration, no praise that can truly match the magnitude of your service and your sacrifice.

This is a place where it is impossible not to be moved by that sacrifice. But even as we gather here this morning, people are gathering all across America, not only to express thanks of a grateful nation, but to tell stories that demand to be told. They're stories of wars whose names have come to define eras, battles that echo throughout history. They're stories of patriots who sacrificed in pursuit of a more perfect union: of a grandfather who marched across Europe, of a friend who fought in Vietnam, of a sister who served in Iraq. They're the stories of generations of Americans who left home barely more than boys and girls, became men and women, and returned home heroes.

And when these Americans who had dedicated their lives to defending this country came home, many settled on a life of service, choosing to make their entire lives a tour of duty. Many chose to live a quiet life, trading one uniform and set of responsibilities for another: doctor,

engineer, teacher, mom, dad. They bought homes, raised families, built businesses. They built the greatest middle class that the world has ever known. Some put away their medals, stayed humble about their service, and moved on. Some, carrying shrapnel and scars, found that they couldn't.

We call this a holiday. But for many veterans, it's another day of memories that drive them to live their lives each day as best as they possibly can. For our troops, it is another day in harm's way. For their families, it is another day to feel the absence of a loved one and the concern for their safety. For our wounded warriors, it is another day of slow and arduous recovery. And in this national cemetery, it is another day when grief remains fresh. So while it is important and proper that we mark this day, it is far more important we spend all our days determined to keep the promises that we've made to all who answer this country's call.

Carved into the marble behind me are the words of our first Commander in Chief: "When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen." Just as the contributions that our service men and women make to this Nation don't end when they take off their uniform, neither do our obligations to them. And when we fulfill those obligations, we aren't just keeping faith with our veterans; we are keeping faith with the ideals of service and sacrifice upon which this Republic was founded.

If we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that there have been times where we as a nation have betrayed that sacred trust. Our Vietnam veterans served with great honor. They often came home greeted not with gratitude or support, but with condemnation and neglect. That's something that will never happen again. To them and to all who have served, in every battle, in every war, we say that it's never too late to say thank you. We honor your service; we are forever grateful. And just as you have not forgotten your missing comrades, neither, ever, will we. Our service men and women have been doing right by America for generations. And as long as I am Commander in Chief, America's going to do right by them.

That is my message to all veterans today. That is my message to all who serve in harm's way. To the husbands and wives back home doing the parenting of two, to the parents who watch their sons and daughters go off to war and the children who wonder when mom and dad is coming home, to all our wounded warriors, and to the families who laid a loved one to rest, America will not let you down. We will take care of our own.

And to those who are serving in far-flung places today, when your tour ends, when you see our flag, when you touch our soil, you will be home in an America that is forever here for you just as you've been there for us. That is my promise—our Nation's promise—to you.

Ninety-one years ago today, the battlefields of Europe fell quiet as World War I came to a close. But we don't mark this day each year as a celebration of victory, as proud of that victory as we are. We mark this day as a celebration of those who made victory possible. It's a day we keep in our minds the brave men and women of this young Nation—generations of them—who above all else believed in and fought for a set of ideals. Because they did, our country still stands, our founding principles still shine, nations around the world that once knew nothing but fear now know the blessings of freedom.

That is why we fight—in hopes of a day when we no longer need to. And that is why we gather at these solemn remembrances and reminders of war—to recommit ourselves to the hard work of peace.

There will be a day before long when this generation of service men and women step out of uniform. They will build families and lives of their own. God willing, they will grow old. And someday, their children and their children's children will gather here to honor them.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:33 a.m. in the Amphitheatre at Arlington National Cemetery.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Veterans Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Biden, Jill; Biden, Joseph R. "Beau," III; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Crayton, Gene A.; Horst, Karl R.; Shinseki, Eric K.

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